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When the Tide Turned

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When the Tide Turned

The American Attack at Chateau Thierry and Belleau Wood in the first week of June, 1918

BY

OTTO H. KAHN

COVER
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AN ADDRESS AT THE
UNITED WAR WORK CAMPAIGN MEETING
OF THE BOSTON ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION
NOVEMBER 12, 1918

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Why the Tide was Fated to Turn

THESE are soul-stirring days. To live through them is a glory and a solemn joy. The words of the poet resound in our hearts: "God's in His heaven, all's well with the world."

Events have shaped themselves in accordance with the eternal law. Once again the fundamental lesson of all history is borne in upon the world, that evil—though it may seem to triumph for a while—carries within it the seed of its own dissolution. Once again it is revealed to us that the God-inspired soul of man is unconquerable and that the power, however formidable, which challenges it is doomed to go down in defeat.

A righteous cause will not only stand unshaken through trials and discomfiture, but it will draw strength from the very set-backs which it may suffer. A wrongful cause can only stand as long as it is buoyed up by success.

The German people were sustained by a sheer obsession akin to the old-time belief in the potent spell of "the black arts" that their military masters were invulnerable and invincible, that by

some power—good or evil, they did not care which—they had been made so, and that the world was bound to fall before them.

The nation was immensely strong only as long as that obsession remained unshaken. With its destruction by a series of defeats which were incapable of being explained as "strategic retreats," their morale crumbled and finally collapsed, because it was not sustained, as that of the Allies was sustained in the darkest days of the war by the faith that they were fighting for all that men hold most sacred.

To those who were acquainted with German mentality and psychology, it had been manifest all along that when the end foreordained did come, it would come with catastrophic suddenness.

Where the Tide Turned

It is the general impression that the tide of victory set in with Marshal Foch's splendid movement against the German flank on July 18th. That movement, it is true, started the irresistible sweep of the wave which was destined to engulf and destroy the hideous power of Prussianism. But the tide which gathered and drove forward the waters out of which that wave arose, had turned before. It turned with and through the supreme valor of our Marines and other American troops in the *first* battle at Chateau Thierry and at Belleau Wood, *in the first week of June.*

The American force engaged was small, measured by the standard of numbers to which we have become accustomed in this war, but the story of their fighting will remain immortal and in its psychological and strategic consequences the action will take rank, I believe, among the decisive battles of the war.

I am not speaking from hearsay. I was in France during the week preceding that battle, the most anxious and gloomy period, probably, of the entire war. What I am about to relate is based either on authoritative information gathered on the spot, or on my own observations. In telling it, nothing is farther from my thoughts than to wish to take away one tittle from the immortal glory which belongs to the Allied armies, nor from the undying gratitude which we owe to the nations who for four heart-breaking years, with superb heroism, fought the battle of civilization—our battle from the very beginning, no less than theirs—and bore untold sacrifices with never faltering spirit.

Just Before the Tide Turned

On the 27th of last May the Germans broke through the French position at the Chemin des Dames, a position which had been considered by the Allies as almost impregnable. They overthrew the French as they had overthrown the British two months earlier. Day by day they came nearer to Paris, until only thirty-nine miles

separated them from their goal. A few days more at the same rate of advance, and Paris was within range of the German guns of terrific destructive power. Paris, the nerve center of the French railroad system and the seat of many French war industries, not only, but the very heart of France, far more to the French people in its meaning and traditions than merely the capital of the country; Paris in imminent danger of ruthless bombardment like Rheims, in possible danger even of conquest by the brutal invader, drunk with lust and with victory! As one Frenchman expressed it to me: "We felt in our faces the very breath of the approaching beast."

And whilst the Hunnish hordes came nearer and nearer, and the very roar of the battle could be dimly and ominously heard from time to time in Paris, there were air raids over the city practically every night, and the shells from the long-range monster guns installed some sixty or seventy miles distant, fell on its houses, places and streets almost every day.

They were not afraid, these superb men and women of France. They do not know the meaning of fear in defense of their beloved soil and their sacred ideals. There was no outward manifestation even of excitement or apprehension. Calmly and resolutely they faced what destiny might bring. But there was deep gloom in their hearts and dire forebodings.

They had fought and dared and suffered and sacrificed for well nigh four years. They had buried

a million of their sons, brothers and fathers. They were bleeding from a million wounds and more. They said: "We will fight on to our last drop of blood, but alas! our physical strength is ebbing. The enemy is more numerous by far than we. Where can we look for aid? The British have just suffered grave defeat. The Italians have their own soil to defend after the disaster of last autumn. Our troops are in retreat. The Americans are not ready and they are untried as yet in the fierce ordeal of modern warfare. The Germans know well that in three months or six months the Americans will be ready and strong in numbers. That is why they are throwing every ounce of their formidable power against us *now*. The Hun is at the gate *now*. Immeasurable consequences are at stake *now*. It is a question of days, not of weeks or months. Where can we look for aid *now*?"

And out of their nooks and corners and hiding places crawled forth the slimy brood of the Bolshevik-Socialists, of the Boloists, Caillouxists and pacifists, and they hissed into the ears of the people, "Make peace! Victory has become impossible. Why go on shedding rivers of blood uselessly? The Germans will give you an honorable, even a generous peace. Save Paris! Make peace!"

The holy wrath of France crushed those serpents whenever their heads became visible. Clemenceau, the embodiment of the dauntless spirit of France, stood forth the very soul of patriotic ardor and

indomitable courage. But the serpents were there, crawling hidden in the grass, ever hissing, "Make peace!"

And then, suddenly out of the gloom flashed the lightning of a new sword, sharp and mighty, a sword which had never been drawn except for freedom, a sword which had never known defeat —the sword of America!

The Turning of the Tide

A division of Marines and other American troops were rushed to the front as a desperate measure to try and stop a gap where flesh and blood, even when animated by French heroism, seemed incapable of further resistance. They came in trucks, in cattle cars, by any conceivable kind of conveyance, crowded together like sardines. They had had little food, and less sleep, for days.

When they arrived, the situation had become such that the French command advised, indeed ordered, them to retire. But they and their brave General would not hear of it. They disembarked almost upon the field of battle and rushed forward, with little care for orthodox battle order, without awaiting the arrival of their artillery, which had been unable to keep up with their rapid passage to that front.

They stormed ahead, right through the midst of a retreating French division, yelling like wild Indians, ardent, young, irresistible in their fury of

battle. Some of the Frenchmen called out a well-meant warning: "Don't go in this direction. There are the boches with machine guns." They shouted back: "That's where we want to go. That's where we have come three thousand miles to go." And they did go, into the very teeth of the deadly machine guns. In defiance of all precedent they stormed, with rifle and bayonet in frontal attack, against massed machine guns.

They threw themselves upon the victory-flushed Huns to whom this unconventional kind of fierce onset came as a complete and disconcerting surprise. They fought like demons, with utterly reckless bravery. They paid the price, alas! in heavy losses, but for what they paid they took compensation in over-full measure.

They formed of themselves a spearhead at the point nearest Paris, against which the enemy's onslaught shattered itself and broke. They stopped the Hun, they beat him back, they broke the spell of his advance. They started victory on its march.

A new and unspent and mighty force had come into the fray. And the Hun knew it to his cost and the French knew it to their unbounded joy. The French turned. Side by side the Americans and the French stood, and on that part of the front the Germans never advanced another inch from that day. They held for awhile, and then set in the beginning of the great defeat.

I was in Paris when the news of the American achievement reached the population. They knew full well what it meant. The danger was still

present, but the crisis was over. The Boche could not break through. He could and would be stopped and ultimately thrown back, out of France, out of Belgium, across the Rhine and beyond!

The aid for which the sorely beset people of France had been praying, had arrived. The Americans had come, young, strong, daring, eager to fight, capable of standing up against and stopping and beating back German shock troops specially selected and trained, and spurred on by the belief in their own irresistibility and the exhaustion of their opponents. The full wave of the hideous instruments of warfare which the devilish ingenuity of the Germans had invented, liquid fire, monstrous shells, various kinds of gases including the horrible mustard gas, had struck the Americans squarely and fully, and they had stood and fought on and won.

The French, so calm in their trials, so restrained in their own victories, gave full vent to their joy and enthusiasm at the splendid fighting and success of the Americans. The talk of them was everywhere in Paris. Hundreds of thousands of American soldiers already in France, thousands coming upon every steamer, millions more to come if needed—and they had shown the great stuff they were made of! All gloom vanished, overnight. The full magnificence of the French fighting morale shone out again—both behind the lines and at the front. "Ils ne passeront pas!" "On les aura."

And the Bolshevik-Socialists, Boloists, weak-

kneed pacifists, and that whole noisome tribe slunk back into their holes and corners and hiding places, and never emerged again.

And, as the people of Paris and the poilus at the front correctly interpreted the meaning of that battle in those early days of June, so did the supreme military genius of Marshal Foch interpret it. He knew what the new great fighting force could do which had come under his orders, and he knew what he meant to do and could do with it. It is an eloquent fact that when six weeks later he struck his great master stroke which was to lead ultimately to the utter defeat and collapse of the enemy, American troops formed the larger portion of an attacking force which, being thrown against a particularly vital position, was meant to deal and did deal the most staggering blow to the enemy; and other American troops were allotted the place which from the paramount responsibility attaching to it, may be termed the place of honor, in the center of the line, in immediate defense of the approaches to Paris.

They made good there—officers and men alike. They made good everywhere, from Cantigny to Sedan. They made good on land, on the seas and in the air; worthy comrades of the war-seasoned heroes of France and Great Britain, worthy defenders of American honor, eager artisans of American glory. When, for the first time the American army went into action as a separate unit under the direct command of its great chief, General Pershing, Marshal Foch allotted them

ten days for the accomplishment of the task set for them, *i. e.*, the ejection of the German army from the strongly fortified St. Mihiel salient, which the enemy had held for four years. They did it in thirty hours, and made a complete and perfect job of it.

I have had the privilege of seeing these splendid boys of ours, in all situations and circumstances, from their camps in America to the front in France—the boys and their equally splendid leaders. The sacred inspiration of what I have thus seen will stay with me to my last day.

I confess I find it hard to speak of them without a catch in my throat and moisture in my eyes. I see them before me now in the fair land of France—brave, strong, ardent; keen and quick-witted; kindly and clean and modest and wholly free from boasting; good-humored and good-natured; willingly submissive to unaccustomed discipline; uncomplainingly enduring all manner of hardships and discomforts; utterly contemptuous of danger, daring to a fault, holding life cheap for the honor and glory of America. What true American can think of them or picture them without having his heart overflow with grateful and affectionate pride?

As I observed our Army "over there," I felt that in them, in the mass of them, representing as they do all sections and callings of America, there had returned the ancient spirit of knighthood. I measure my words. I am not exaggerating. If I had to find one single word with which to

characterize our boys, I should select the adjective "knightly."

A French officer who commanded a body of French troops, fighting fiercely and almost hopelessly in Belleau Wood near Chateau Thierry (since then officially designated by the French Government as the Wood of the Marine Brigade), told me that when they had arrived almost at the point of total exhaustion, suddenly the Americans appeared rushing to the rescue. One of the American officers hurried up to him, saluted and said in execrably pronounced French just six words: "Vous—fatigués, vous—partir, notre job." "You—tired, you—get away, our job."

And right nobly did they do their job. Need I ask whether we shall do ours?

The Tide of Our Gratitude

The job now before us is to raise the needed funds to enable the organizations included in the United War Work Campaign to do theirs. No one who has not had occasion to see our Army over there, can fully realize how much of comfort, of cheer and of home feeling these organizations are bringing to our boys. For, these boys with all their knightly virtues are very human. They are healthy young animals with strong appetites for food and for recreation. They will attack a dish of American ice-cream or a hot drink with a zest inferior only to that with which they attack a

German machine-gun nest. They will crowd into an entertainment hut, a reading and writing or lecture room with an eagerness comparable to that with which they storm enemy positions. And they have an intense and touching longing for home.

The feeling of the long distance separating them from home is the one hardest to get accustomed and resigned to for those splendid fellows. The organizations of the United War Work, with the vast ramifications of their beneficent activities in all places where our army is fighting, training, constructing or resting are giving to the boys something akin to a home, something which brings the sweet and eagerly welcomed touch of American surroundings and atmosphere into the strange and unaccustomed world in which they are moving for the time being.

One must not think of those who are representing these organizations in their contact with the Army, as bespectacled anæmic beings. They are, on the contrary, red-blooded men and women, with warm hearts and sympathetic understanding. The services and benefits of the great organizations they represent are open to any and every man wearing the United States uniform, irrespective of race or religion or antecedents. No questions are asked, and every one is made cordially welcome by the men and women who with devoted zeal, tirelessly, courageously and self-sacrificingly, often within reach of shot and shell, tend to the wants of our boys.

The spirit in which they administer their task is large and broad and of wide human sympathy and tolerance, as I can testify from personal observation. They realize fully that they are not dealing with saints or aspirants to sainthood, but with average youth and with soldiering youth at that. And they know what youth—clean, vigorous, normal American youth wants and appreciates in the way of material and spiritual things. They know the temptations besetting youth, but they also know that the normal American boy would far rather have clean enjoyment than tainted pleasures.

They are offering to all soldiers comfort, cheer, diversion, instruction, in short, the opportunity to gratify every legitimate aspiration, and if the records show that our army is the healthiest and cleanest that ever stood in the field, a large part of the credit for this enviable result belongs to the organizations included in the United War Work Campaign.

The extent of their work with its resultant inestimable benefit to our boys, is limited only by the greater or lesser liberality with which the country will respond to their appeal for funds—and, surely, no liberality can be too great towards those who fought without counting the cost in life and limb for our honor, glory and safety. And if, thank God, the fighting and maiming and killing have now come to an end, let us give in double measure as a peace-offering, as a thanksgiving, as a tribute to the memory of those who

laid down their lives for America and for humanity.

Heaven forbid that we should permit an impression to go out to our soldiers that we took good care of them as long as we needed them to stand between us and the enemy, but that when the danger to us is past, we fail them. The debt of gratitude which we owe to them cannot be measured or discharged in money, but we can at least prove to them, as far as we can express it by giving, that we love them with proud and tender affection and that their well-being is a first charge upon our means.

America has broken many a record since we entered the war. There is one record yet to be broken before our boys come home. That is the record of the outpouring of a nation's gratitude to its defenders.

The Tide of Peace

For some time past we have heard approaching in the skies, the beating of the wings of the Angel of Peace. Now he has descended upon our poor, bleeding, war-torn earth. He holds in his hands the great gifts of Freedom and Victory. We greet him with boundless gratitude and with reverent joy. The hideous idol of Prussian militarism lies shattered at the feet of the free nations, its arch-priest dethroned and disgraced, cast out by his own distracted people and branded with the curse of the entire world.

To this blessed and glorious result, we may

justly claim that America has contributed no mean part. We thank God for the day when, spurning the lure of ease and plenty and boundless prosperity, we chose for our own that road to the heights which leads through sacrifice and suffering and brought our mighty and unspent power to the rescue of the hard pressed champions of humanity. We then sought no advantage for ourselves and we seek none now. We have proved that America is not the "land of the almighty dollar," as too many believed and as especially our enemies fatuously believed to their undoing, but a land of high idealism, ardently zealous to do and dare and spend itself in a righteous cause.

We look back over these past fateful nineteen months and we examine our hearts and thoughts and deeds and we believe we may say justly and without self-complacency that the men and women of America have not been found unworthy under the great test to which they were put. Old and young, rich and poor, East and West, North and South—all but an insignificant few who are not spiritually Americans—have risen to the inspiration of our high cause and have joined in patriotic devotion and willing sacrifice.

A new and exalted spirit pervades the land. We have made a new pact of unity. We have come to understand and appreciate each other better. We respect each other more. We are justly proud of the qualities which all Americans have proved themselves to possess in common.

We draw strengthened faith and heightened

inspiration from the glorious vindication of the irresistible potency of the American spirit which has made its own, transfused and merged into a homogeneous people, thinking and feeling alike in national essentials the men and women of many races who make up America.

We are now walking along the heights of great achievements and lofty aspirations. Let us shun the descent into the valleys we have left behind. Let us trust and strive that some at least of the things we have gained spiritually may never leave us.

America comes out of the war with her economic and moral potency and prestige vastly enhanced, with her outlook broadened, her field of activity expanded, her enterprise quickened, her imagination stirred, her every faculty stimulated.

The vista which opens before us of America's future is one of dazzling greatness, spiritually and materially. The realization of that vision cannot fail us if we but meet our problems in a spirit of true Americanism, of moderation and self restraint and of justice and good will to all, rejecting alike privilege and demagogy, banishing all class rule, be it of capital or of labor.

In that spirit let us grasp each other by the hand and thus resolved and united against enemies without or foes within, let us march on towards the high destiny that Providence has allotted to the country which in grateful pride and deep affection we call our own.

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